

BRITISH AND AMERICAN GOLF COMPARED

Concluded

By HAROLD H. HILTON

IT has been said on many hands that the American golfer suffers in comparison with his British cousin in the fact that he is not called upon to play the game on sufficiently difficult links. There may be some truth in this contention, for there can be but little doubt that a course which calls for serious thought, from the playing of the first tee-shot to the final approach, must of necessity be the means of bringing into execution latent talent that would otherwise remain dormant in the player. On this side it has been proved time after time that the early education on our seaside courses, which invariably call for the playing of nearly every variety of stroke in the game, has proved an inestimable advantage to our leading players. Not only have everyone of the leading professionals learnt the rudiments of the game on links by the sea, but moreover there is hardly an amateur of note in the kingdom who did not in his youth enjoy a similar advantage, and it is undoubtedly seaside links which have made British golf what it is.

Now you have in your country, as far as I am aware, not a single golf course which, according to our interpretation, can be considered a seaside links. On the other hand, you have in the National, a course which supplies a wonderful substitute for the real article and which from the standpoint of difficulty and variety of stroke demanded, is quite the equal of any of our seaside courses. To my way of thinking it is the most difficult and exacting links I have ever played upon, and as a training ground for the young nothing could be better, for every shot calls for serious judgment and great care. But you are not

well supplied with training grounds of this description, not nearly so well supplied as we are, and therefore in this respect the American player must be considered at a disadvantage with the British golfer. The young golfer acquires variety in his game only by having to contend with difficulties.

To my mind the chief distinction between American and British golf lies in the advantage the Britisher holds in the variety of iron-shots he has at command. The iron play of Travers and Evans is full witness to the wonderful accuracy in approaching your prominent players are capable of. At Wheaton in 1912 I was very much impressed with the judgment of distance and unfailing accuracy in direction Travers displayed with his iron clubs. It almost bordered on the mechanical. On the other hand, every approach shot he played was accomplished by the utilization of the same methods: he stood square to the ball, gripped the handle of the club in much the same place for both long and short strokes and every time he appeared as if he was playing for a slight pull. The short approach was but a replica of the long approach, with merely the natural exception, that there was less force applied. I have not the slightest doubt that he did introduce a certain degree of variety in the playing of the different shots, but it was certainly not very patent to the observer. The very same thing struck me when I first saw Francis Ouimet play on this side. For the long and short shots he appeared to place his hands in almost identically the same position on the grip of the club, and in consequence there was evident the

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same lack of variety and originality in his iron play. It savoured of the studiously mechanical, and I may say I have noticed this in the case of the majority of American players I have come across, they do not possess the same varied control of the club that the average British player has and in consequence they do not hit the ball as crisply.

The question arises as to whether this lack of variety in the iron play of American players is in any way due to the comparative simplicity and sameness in the courses on your side. There is not the slightest shadow of doubt that the links upon which the player in his younger years has the opportunity of learning the rudiments of the game is prone to have a strong bearing upon the class of game he develops, and the manner in which he is given to play his shots. On this side, certain famous links have left a distinct imprint upon the methods of many players who have made a name for themselves, and this is particularly noticeable in the case of the classic St. Andrews course, as it is quite a notorious fact that the St. Andrews golfer, while a past master in the art of the running approach, is on the average an indifferent manipulator of the shots which have to be pitched over a hazard. The reason for this is evident, in the fact that in the first instance it pays the player to play all the approaches on the classic green with a shot which will run a considerable distance after pitching, and moreover if the drives are correctly placed, there is hardly an approach on the course in the playing of which it is necessary to hit the ball at a high trajectory and at the same time impart spin to the ball. Consequently the St. Andrews youth, seldom being called upon to play this class of shot, is of necessity weak in the playing of it, and when he arrives on a course on which there is a necessity to play a number of high lofted approaches he is prone to be all at sea. Although St. Andrews is admitted on all hands to provide a magnificent test of the game, on the other hand, it cannot claim an equal distinction as a nursery for the game, as it is prone to leave its pupils with a limited repertoire of strokes.

In the light of the happenings in the Amateur Championship at Sandwich this year and the failures of your three leading amateurs in that event, the performance of Heinrich Schmidt at St. Andrews in the previous season must now appear a little inexplicable to American golfers as I know that you would hardly class him with Travers or Ouimet. The explanation is mainly to be found in the very peculiarities in the course which I have been speaking about. Schmidt had one extremely useful approaching club in his bag, a Jigger as I believe you invariably designate these narrow-faced approaching irons, and with this club he was not only very much at home, but moreover it was ideally suited for a very large percentage of the approaches which had to be played,

and he was using this particular instrument with telling accuracy. The strong point in his iron play was the very shot which is so essential in the playing of the classic course, and the weak point in his approach play, the high pitch, is seldom called for at St. Andrews and in consequence he was absolutely in his element and played with the utmost confidence.

Many of your courses are simple to play in comparison with some of our difficult seaside courses. This may have had an effect upon the methods of your players especially in the handling of their iron clubs. The more difficult the problems the young player has to solve in his younger years the more he is apt to learn the various methods by which he can play approaches, and the more testing the courses, the more likely is he to attain consistent accuracy. As I have said before, it is a significant fact that all our best players, amateur and professional, originally learnt the game on seaside courses which admittedly call for a greater variety of strokes than inland courses.

But again there is much in imitation, and youth is peculiarly imitative. Very often and unconsciously so, it is a big advantage to a young player to have a finished model to work upon, and with all due respect to the English and Scottish professionals who have been resident among you for many years, I cannot think that they supply quite the same class of model as represented by the leading professionals on this side. In the question of having models to imitate, your young players have not enjoyed quite the same advantage that young British players have, and personally I think that this is not a little evidenced by the styles of the two schools, as there is not quite the same freedom of body action in the average American amateur's style as is to be found in the style of the British player. This is particularly noticeable in the feet action. In truth he is a freer player all around and whether this is altogether an advantage is an open question as there is such a thing as too much freedom and many of our young players suffer severely from this complaint. Their styles are not sufficiently careful or methodical, and in this respect they might take a leaf from out of the book of the American amateur.

To conclude there is one phase of the game in which the American golfer stands supreme and that is in the art of getting the ball into the hole. Your players are not only more accurate putters than ours, but moreover their methods are based upon much sounder principles. They have realized the advantage of keeping the body comparatively rigid and trusting to the actions of the wrists. Your players combine stability with rhythm in the art of putting. Our players appear to have entirely forgotten the importance of this necessary combination to successful work on the greens. I am convinced that the British player is on the average not as good a putter as he was fifteen to twenty years ago.